

The Sunbury News (OH)

February 25, 2019
Final Edition

Climate change and clients; News & Views

BYLINE: Staff & Wire Reports

SECTION: OPINION

LENGTH: 3771 words

Storm-lashed South Carolina reassesses global warming's role

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Associated Press

Monday, February 18

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) When he took the job 15 years ago, Horry County Emergency Manager Randy Webster figured his biggest disasters would be wind and surge rolling over his county's beaches, South Carolina's top tourist destination.

Instead, his worries have shifted inland, where rivers overflowing their banks have caused two massive floods in three years.

"We're getting into this sort of unknown territory," Webster said. "We typically in emergency management have some point of reference to work with. Two floods like this it's unheard of."

Scientists say the Earth's warming climate means more heavy rainfall over short periods of time, and that translates to larger, more ferocious storms on the scale of 2017's Hurricane Harvey in Texas or 2018's Hurricane Florence in the Carolinas. Florence dumped six months' worth of rain on the Carolinas in the course of just a few days.

The growing realization that such events are going to become more common as the result of global warming is forcing Webster and other state officials to revisit how they prepare for and respond to natural disasters.

Late last year, Republican Gov. Henry McMaster created the South Carolina Floodwater Commission to figure out how to better combat flooding unleashed by hurricanes, rising ocean levels and other rain systems upstream that send rivers and creeks over their banks on the way to the Atlantic Ocean.

One thing that local governments must do is use forecast tools that predict several different scenarios based on possible temperature rise, rather than relying on flood maps of the past, when severe inundations were rare, said Larry Larson, a former director and senior policy adviser for the Association of State Floodplain Managers.